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"SCRIPTURE TODAY" IS INSTITUTE THEME

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NEW YORK -- Evangelicals and liberals came together at Trinity Institute's eleventh National Conference in January to deal with the topic, "Scripture Today: Handling the Word Rightly," but they did not clash. Instead they took each other's measure and applauded most of what was revealed. Only one or two barbed questions gave a clue to theological differences of the past, and the present.

Trinity Institute's director, the Rev. Durstan R. McDonald, described the task: "We shall move beyond modern rationalization of culturally determined positions and neo-fundamentalism. We shall attend to the task of being faithful to Scripture. We seek to handle the Word rightly," he said.

In the first address, the Very Rev. Frederick Borsch, dean of the Church Divinity School of the Pacific (Episcopal), identified three major approaches to issues of authority and interpretation of the Bible, and faulted all of them. In the first, the essential authority of Scripture passes from God through the historical church; the institutional church is the ultimate interpreter of Scripture. This approach is not a viable option for Christians who have no Magisterium, Dean Borsch said, and has been replaced by historical criticism.

Historical criticism, the method preferred by liberals, allows scholars "so to interpret the Scriptures that the past becomes alive and illuminates our present with new possibilities for social and personal transformation," Dean Borsch said. But neither is this always successful, because it regularly does not raise the role of God's involvement with history.

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Direct reading, the second approach, gives high priority to the serious and thoughtful reader of Scripture, with guidance from the Holy Spirit, and enables the Bible to speak clearly and forcefully to contemporary lives. This approach views events in the Bible as both human and divine with application for today, with uncertainties to be settled by the overall sense of the Bible. The flaw here is that different communities interpret the Bible in different ways.

The third, fundamentalism with its literal acceptances, opens itself to derisive humor and does not correspond with the information and insights of thinking people who have studied the Bible.

"We might wish we had an inerrant, infallible book, but it is clear that the various books of the Bible have emerged from the crucible of tensions and paradoxes of human history. So, how may we read and hear our Bible faithfully?" asked Dean Borsch. His answer: "I maintain that these three flawed approaches, when properly employed in a dynamic interrelationship with one another and understood rather differently, can open for us the broad avenue needed if the authoritative power and passion of the Bible is to stream into our lives."

Jim Wallis of Sojourners, the magazine and evangelical community in Washington, D. C., told the conference how commitment is made and lived out among his 60 colleagues. Their Bible reading has led them to believe God has a class bias. The world's people are poor, and the Church is rich, he said, and God is on the side of the poor. "This fact must be elevated to the status of doctrine by a church that has wealth at its core," he said.

"Jesus calls us to a break-away life style. He says we must give away all we have and follow him. But in a nuclear age, we face a fundamental question of security. It is necessary to understand where our security lies (in money, status, friendship) because these symbols of security will be used to restrain and to intimidate us to keep us from freedom in Christ," Mr. Wallis said.

"Pentecostal Economics," the topic of his address, is illustrated in Acts 2. "Early Christians devoted themselves to teaching, sharing, and healing. The coming of the Holy Spirit created a common life for these Christians. The Church has done endless acrobatics to avoid dealing with this fact," Mr. Wallis said.

"Our way of living crushes the poor and is a violation of Christian fellowship. It is an offense to the unity of the Body of Christ. The early Christians had experienced the Holy Spirit, and they shared everything they had," he said. Charismatics, he said, find Acts 2 a key passage, but like other groups fail to accept the whole.

Asked if he were equating poverty with freedom and holiness, Mr. Wallis responded, "Yes. The economic position of the church robs it of freedom, of holiness. I am not talking about poverty in the abstract, but of living free of economies. It is improbable for our economic system to continue. Radical change is coming, because it must. Our natural resources are running out. The question is how change will be accomplished. The Church could contribute to that change," he said.

Peggy A. Way, assistant professor of pastoral theology and counseling, Vanderbilt Divinity School, challenged the attending clergy to claim their ministry. "Criticism of our sacred priesthood has led us to demean and diminish our own pastoral care. There has been a reversal in our perception: anything secular must be right and anything holy must be wrong," she said.

Using counseling as an example, she constructed a model for therapists and one for clergy. Therapists 1) develop a less personal relationship, 2) need not make public statements on vital issues and 3) wait for clients to come to them. The clergy mode is superior because clergy 1) develop a personal, one-to-one relationship, 2) preach and make public statements, thus taking a position, 3) can take initiative in reaching out to people.

She urged the clergy to reclaim theology as the property of the Christian community, not of seminarians. "People come to see us because they think we have something to offer. We do. We are called forth to interpret the nature of truth and to help people live in history," she said.

Dr. David Tracy of the University of Chicago, related "Narratives in the New Testament and Theological Realities." Both proclamation and narrative are primary genre of the New Testament which includes and demands both, as does human experience, he said. The stories people tell disclose their character. The classic story tells how a single human being lived and faced death distinct from philosophical, ethical, and sociological reflections.

"The Gospels share the assumption common to humankind that life itself has the character of a story. The Gospels remain confessed and confessing narrative." He identified as narratives contained in the Gospels 1) the miniature Gospels of individual sayings about Jesus or attributed to him which made grace and deliverance visible. These include victories over Satan, confrontations with those who will not "hear" the Gospel, expressions of sacrifice, suffering and love; 2) the parables interpreted by literary and hermeneutical thinkers to define the Kingdom of God; 3) the narratives of the deeds of Jesus in his ministry. Here Christ's deeds express in action the coming of God's Kingdom proclaimed in Word, and in his deeds -- especially for the lowly, the poor, the outcast, the oppressed; 4) strange and convention-breaking narratives like his "table fellowship" with tax collectors and sinners, his overturning of the money changers in the Temple.

Most important, Dr. Tracy said, are the passion narratives where the heart of the Christian story about Jesus is found. In the Old Testament, the narrative ranges over the long history of an entire people, Israel. In the New Testament the entire weight of the story of deliverance is concentrated upon a single individual, Jesus of Nazareth.

Punctuating the addresses were two sermons. The Very Rev. O. C. Edwards, of Seabury Western Theological Seminary, spoke at the opening Eucharist at historic Trinity Church. The Rev. James A. Forbes Jr., of Union Theological Seminary, preached at a noon meeting.

Dr. Edwards, in illuminating the Conference theme, "Scripture Today: Handling the Word Rightly," reviewed some conflicting biblical evidence about St. Paul. Taking Paul's conversion as a departure point he posed a series of questions to focus on the situation. What was Paul converted from? What was he converted to? Where is the evidence that he was a sinner?

"It is anachronistic to say Paul was converted from one religion to another. He simply left one party and joined another," said Dr. Edwards. Nonetheless, he concluded, "The Church needs a restored confidence that what was true of the Word of the prophet is also true of the written Word: it will accomplish God's purpose."

Dr. Forbes employed an eclectic style and content that delighted the conferees as he demonstrated the variety in preaching style, prayer and liturgy employed across the United States today. His audience of Episcopalians heartily applauded two examples. "Sometimes I am searching for a prayer in desperation," he said, "somehow 'Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known,' just don't out it." And again, "You Episcopalians have a great Trinitarian prayer, 'Lord, have mercy upon us, Christ, have mercy upon us, Lord, have mercy upon us.' Well, there are days when 'Ugh, Ugh, Ugh,' is as much as I can say." He introduced "eschatological epistemology" which he said is needed to deal with the world's ills of "isms" -- racism, nationalism and sexism.

Leading the workshops, "Interpretation of Scripture," were Reginald H. Fuller, professor of New Testament at Virginia Theological Seminary; Josephine Massyngherde Ford, professor of theology, University of Notre Dame; and Samuel L. Terrien, professor emeritus, Union Theological Seminary.

Trinity Institute East met in New York City Jan. 24-26 and Trinity Institute West met at Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, Jan. 27-29. They offered identical presentations with the exception of Dr. Terrien and Dr. Forbes who appeared only in the East. There were 344 people in attendance coming from 45 of the 50 states and from Bermuda, Canada, Guam, Ireland, Puerto Rico and St. Croix (Virgin Islands).

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